COSMOS AND CONSCIOUSNESS:
UNDERSTANDING CREATION MYTHS

SOAN 100: ARGUMENT AND INQUIRY SEMINAR

PROFESSOR JEROME M. LEVI

FALL 2018
Cosmos and Consciousness: Understanding Creation Myths
SOAN 100: Argument and Inquiry Seminar
Fall 2018

Carleton College
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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Class meetings
Time: M/W 1:50-3:00 PM; F 2:20-3:20 PM
Place: Library 305

“Myths are things that never happened but always are.” Sallustius, Fourth Century

Course Description
Creation myths are the most profound and significant of all myths because they concern both the underlying patterns of existence and the ultimate meaning of life. On both subjective and objective levels, they pose some of the most elemental questions that humans can ask. How did the cosmos begin and why does it, and everything in it, have the form that it does? Who are we? Why are we here? How should we behave and not behave and why? How is the sacred differentiated from the profane? What should our roles be vis-à-vis each other? How should we regard the cultural, natural, and supernatural dimensions of reality? What is the origin of the soul and, if we have one, where does it go when we die?

Drawing on approaches from anthropology, psychology, religion, and literary studies, this course will examine how different cultures and theoreticians have sought answers to these questions. Developing a comparative perspective, we will examine Biblical, Native American, Middle Eastern, European, Asian, African, and Oceanic origin myths, among others.

Creation myths are a type of origin myth. Generally speaking, origin myths can be subdivided into cosmogonic myths, accounting for the creation of the universe, etiological myths, explaining the cause of certain natural or cultural phenomena, and foundational myths, describing the founding of cities, tribes, and nations. In this course, we will examine all three types of origin myths since in many cases cosmogonic, etiological, and foundational myths overlap and in fact are often found in the same narrative. As Peter Nabokov, eminent scholar of Native American cultures, puts it in his introduction to The Origin Myth of Acoma Pueblo:

“Stories about the origins of any community’s universe – its gods, spirits, heroes, and landscapes – are the most important accounts any society can tell itself about itself. They are its divine charter, declaration of independence, constitution, and bill of rights all wrapped into one guiding narrative. Like a cosmic compass, they set its course. They provide models for its institutions and remind its peoples of who they are, why they exist, and how they fit into their grand scheme of things. As foundational narratives, these stories are sometimes dramatized usually for members only and at regular moments on the community’s ceremonial calendar. They are also recalled as scripts or formulas for conducting proper rituals. And they can be revisited whenever their teachings seem most relevant.”

Pedagogy and Mechanics

Readings
The following books will be used for this course. They are available in the campus bookstore:


All readings not in the textbooks above will be placed on Moodle.

Due Dates and Grade Breakdown

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st paper (short essay)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>due Sept. 21</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd paper (outline)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>due Oct. 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd paper (draft)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>due Oct 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>4th paper (final)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>due Nov. 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>due on date for which you signed up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>ongoing</td>
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Class Participation

Argument & Inquiry seminars are designed specifically to “introduce students to the ways in which scholars ask questions, effectively and ethically find, use, and evaluate information, and construct arguments.” This course will run as a discussion-based seminar. A premium will be placed on presentation, writing, and analytical skills. The course entails a fair but not exorbitant amount of reading for a first-year seminar, approximately 100-250 pages each week. Learning how to read effectively and efficiently is an important skill to acquire, especially in an age of information overload.

Daily class attendance is expected; dates when papers or presentations are due are no exception. Department policy is to mark down late papers. Extensions may be granted only in the case of illness or other extenuating circumstances.

Students are expected to enter into the discussion of course topics. Argument and Inquiry seminars are intended to stimulate dialectical and/or dialogical thinking; that is, thinking that involves dialogue or extended exchange between different points of view or frames of reference. To help stimulate class discussions you are therefore expected to come to each class meeting with two questions on the readings you have prepared before class. Failure to participate in class discussions will be taken as an indication of insufficient engagement with the readings. The amount one speaks, however, is less important than the quality of things that are said. On the other hand, pearls of wisdom are not expected to drop from your mouth every time you open it – and burning yet unasked questions are, quite literally, the dumbest. Often times many people are wondering the same things. In short, in this class we will strive to generate an atmosphere in which you feel free to think creatively, hash out ideas, and challenge – each other as well as me.

Writing assignments

There are four writing assignments for this course. The first is a brief (2-3 page) essay requiring you to discuss a creation myth by trying your hand at analyzing it symbolically. The next three writing assignments are designed to assist you in incrementally writing a research paper over the course of the term, wherein you will be required to interpret either a creation myth of your choosing or analyze a theme, motif, structure, or archetype that occurs in two or more creation myths, using ideas drawn from the course readings to help formulate your argument. Thus, the second assignment (5-7 pages) requires you to write an abstract, outline, and annotated bibliography for your intended final paper. The third paper will be a rough draft of your final paper (7-9 pages). And your last assignment will be your term research paper in
its final form (9-12 pages). Students are encouraged to meet with me individually during office hours or by appointment about their paper topics.

**Oral Presentation**
At the end of the course you will share your research and findings with the rest of the class in a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation.

**Evaluation**
“A” represents exceptional work. It reflects original ideas that have been expressed clearly, creatively, and logically. An “A” requires an extraordinarily high level of achievement in all areas. It will be impossible for papers with many mechanical errors to receive an A.

“B” is a good grade, and one that needs to be earned. In this course it reflects that the student has prepared all of the work, and that her or his work is of a consistently high level. Do not feel that a B is a bad grade.

“C” indicates work that is adequate but uninspired and/or poorly executed. Note that it is entirely possible to write a paper that is 100% “right,” but mostly without merit (usually because it merely states the obvious.)

“D” is assigned when work is incomplete or of uniformly poor quality.

“F” indicates that work does not meet minimal requirements.

**I. Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Creation Myths and World Mythology**

**Mon 9/10 (Week 1) – Why creation myths?**
Watch tonight on your computer: *The Story of God with Morgan Freeman – Creation* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTKjdYO53tg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTKjdYO53tg) (2 hours, 30 minutes)

**Wed. 9/12 – Library orientation, meet in Library 306**

**Fri. 9/14 - Types of creation myths: An introduction**

Creation Myth Typology – handout

Recommended: *Enuma Elish* – The Mesopotamian Creation Myth (pdf)

**Mon 9/17 (Week 2) – Creation myths: perspectives from astrophysics**
*Guest Lecturer: Joel Weisberg*, Herman and Gertrude Mosier Stark Professor of Physics and Astronomy and the Natural Sciences, Carleton College.


**Wed 9/19 – Mircea Eliade: The cosmogony in the history of religion**

**YOM KIPPUR, NO CLASS**

However, please read:

**Fri 9/21 – Mircea Eliade: The cosmogony in the history of religion, con’t**

**Required to attend:** 2018 A & I Convocation, 10:50 a.m., Skinner Chapel;
*Fred Hagstrom*, Rae Schupack Nathan Professor of Art, “Deepening the Habit of Learning, Fostering Curiosity and Imagination for a Lifetime.”


**1st Writing Assignment DUE** – Short essay: Choose one of the creation myths from the readings in Leonard and McClure’s *Myth and Knowing* and briefly discuss its significance: 1) by classifying it according to the creation myth type or types to which it corresponds, and 2) by suggesting a reading of its symbolism in terms of deeper meanings (2-3 pages, double-spaced).

**Mon 9/24 (Week 3) – Carl Jung: depth psychology and the mystery of creation**


**Wed 9/26 - Carl Jung: depth psychology and the mystery of creation, con’t.**


**Fri 9/28 - Creation and the psychology of creativity**


**Mon 10/1 (Week 4) – Myth and history**


**2nd Writing Assignment DUE:** Abstract, Outline, and Annotated bibliography for final paper

**Wed 10/3 – Bronislaw Malinowski: A functionalist perspective**


Joseph Campbell’s “Four Functions of Myth” - handout
Fri 10/5 – Claude Lévi-Strauss: The structural study of myth


Mon, 10/8 (Week 5) – Claude Lévi-Strauss: The structural study of myth, con’t


Wed 10/10 – The Big Bang, Lurianic cosmogony, and Lévi-Strauss: A Reappraisal


II. Topics in creation mythology: selected case studies

Fri 10/12 – Recurring motifs, themes, and patterns

Mon 10/15 (Week 6) – MID-TERM BREAK

Wed 10/17 – The Dying God myth: from the Middle East to Southern California


Fri 10/19 – Culture Heroes as creators


Mon 10/22 (Week 7) - Tricksters as creators

In the section on “Reading Trickster Myths,” read the following selections: “How Coyoteplaced the Stars (Wasco, The Dalles, Oregon), The Treasures of the Gods (Norse – Iceland), The Seven Great Deeds of Maui (Oceania – Hawaii), Prometheus from Hesiod’s *Theogony* (Greek), The Raven Steals the Light (Haida – Pacific Northwest North America).

Recommended:

**Wed 10/24 – (En)gendering creation**


**3rd Writing Assignment DUE: Draft of final paper**

**Fri 10/26 - Cosmological frames: symbolizing space, time, and motion**


**Mon 10/29 (Week 8) – Earth Diver and Emergence Myths**


**Wed 10/31 – Creation myths as politics**


**Fri 11/2 – An Indo-European creation myth? Implications from the Vedas and Beyond**


**Mon 11/5 (Week 9) – Cracking the Cosmic Egg (or the separation of Earth and Sky)**


**Wed 11/7 – Student presentations**

**Fri 11/9 – Student presentations**

**Mon 11/12 (Week 10) – Student presentations**

**Wed 11/14 – Wrap-up and conclusions**

**NOVEMBER 16, 2018 - 4th Writing Assignment DUE: Final Research Paper**